

**It's not just Playschool where the toys are out of control. Our very own toyboy, Matthew Hopkins gives the game away on some Cabbage Patch Kids who are far from limp.**

There's a really chilling moment in the 1988 horror hit *Child's Play* (Warner) when the film's heroine Catherine Hicks suddenly realises that the sinister little 'Chucky' doll she has bought for her son has been moving around without the aid of batteries. She goes to throw the doll in the fire, and is horrified when it suddenly comes to life and starts spewing hateful curses at her. Then it chomps down on her arm and makes its escape into the shadows. That'll teach her to buy discount from Devil-Dolls-R-Us. (In fact 'Chucky' was possessed by the evil spirit of a mass murderer, so she's probably eligible for a refund).

Even before Disney's *Pinocchio* chucked away his strings, cinema screens were full of mysterious dolls and puppets that managed to move about on their own (with a little bit of help from the special effects department). You don't have to be Sigmund Freud to tune in on the primal fascination at work here. When we were very young, our innocent imaginations invested favourite playthings with character and personality. But what if those playthings were sly and sinister, like toy boy Chucky or the clown that frightens the little girl in *Poltergeist*? Who knows what evil thoughts are going on behind those sightless marble eyes?

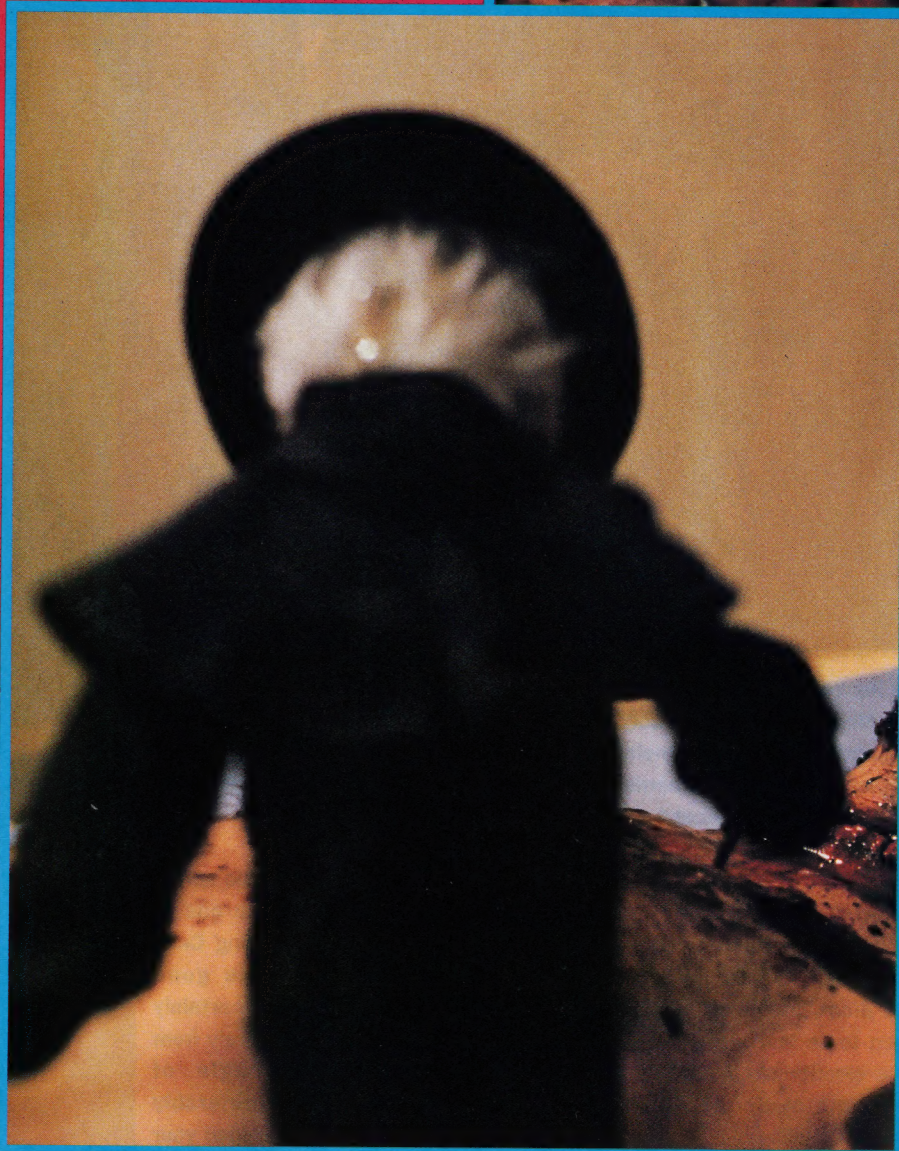
Our worst fears are realised in movies like *XTRO*, where an 'action man' comes to life under the power of a violent alien life force and murders poor old Lou Beale from *Eastenders* (Anna Wing). Whatever next, I wonder, the Ken and Barbie massacre?

*XTRO* provokes laughter rather than chills because it's set in a 'realistic' environment. The best killer doll movies are those with an eerie fairytale atmosphere like Stuart Gordon's underrated *Dolls* (First Independent) for example. This one tells of what happens when a disparate bunch of travelers take shelter for the night in a spooky mansion belonging to a kindly old dollmaker and his wife. Amongst their number are two punk girls who decide to loot the place of its valuables. But little do they realise that the house is guarded by a small army of killer dolls, who come to life and polish them off gruesomely. At a snappy 77 minutes in length, *Dolls* is a pleasantly spooky affair enlivened by some neat special effects and Gordon's sure eye for interesting visuals. It's no *Re-Animator*

but it's still a lot of fun.

*Dolls* was produced by that unstoppable 'B' movie merchant Charles Band, who also brought us *The Puppet Master* and was similarly responsible for its newly released sequel, *Puppet Master 2*. The latter film is just out on the EV label and concerns a group of young parapsychologist who set up shop in a weird old mansion (conveniently located next to the cemetery) which has been the site of a number of gruesome murders. None of the kids seem to have seen *Puppet Master 1*, otherwise they'd have realised that the murders were committed by a bunch of murderous marionettes who are lurking about in the woodwork, just waiting to crawl out at night and polish our heroes off in a variety of

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grisly ways. They also come up against the re-animated Puppet Master, who has returned from the grave wearing *Invisible Man* type bandages to disguise the fact he's somewhat the worse for wear.

There's nothing earth-shatteringly new about the plot of this one, but at least the sequel is a marked improvement on the original, thanks to some impressive stop-motion animation by Randy Cook and writer/director David Allen's decision to go for serious chills rather than cheap laughs. As before though, it's the puppets that steal the show from the dreary human actors. Among the most impressive of the Puppet Master's aptly-named creations are the deadly 'Torch' who can boil his victims alive with his built in flamethrower, and 'Blade', who is pretty handy with a carving knife. There's also one called 'Pinhead', whose special powers remain a mystery. When the puppets take over the world, I

guess there's a job for him in local government...

One of the big problems with killer doll moving is that you always end up asking yourself why the main characters don't just step on these tiny terrors and have done with it. Never has this plot flaw been more in evidence than in the final episode of the 70s Amicus Anthology *Asylum*, where nutty Herbert Lom had created a race of diminutive little killer dolls that were programmed to creep up behind his enemies and stab them through the neck. These were about as scary as the cabbage patch kids, and scenes of terrified people running away from them just didn't cut the mustard!

Ask any horror buff and they'll tell you that by far the best of all 'killer doll' flicks is the final episode of a 1975 TV movie called *Trilogy Of Terror*

Directed by Dan (Night Stalker) Curtis, this

perfectly realised terror tale was called *Prey*, and had Karen Black being terrorised by a voodoo doll that came to life in her apartment. The cat and mouse struggle that ensued - with the evil little monster slashing at her ankles with a knife and biting into her arm with its razor teeth remains one of the scariest things EVER done on telly. Incidentally, writer/director Tom Holland freely acknowledges that this superb Richard Matheson-scripted show actually provided the inspiration for *Child's Play*.

A somewhat less threatening living doll was the central character of the recent romantic comedy, *Mannequin* (Warner Home Video). Here the lovely Kim Cattrall played an ancient Egyptian princess reincarnated as a dummy in a Philadelphia department store window. The dopey plot which borrowed liberally from John Collier's classic short story Evening Primrose, had cute Kim falling





a knife. *The Devil Doll* ends with a particularly neat twist that sees the evil Vorelli trapped within the wooden body of his own dummy. Now there's a man who needs a helping hand!

The film was quite an impressive addition to the tiny sub-genre of 'evil ventriloquist's dummy' movies that began with a memorable sequence in the classic 1945 Ealing ghost story compendium *Dead Of Night* and continued with the 1978 Richard Attenborough thriller, *Magic*. The former starred Michael Redgrave as a ventriloquist dominated by his dummy (that's not the sort you suck on!) and the latter trod a similar path at greater length, with Anthony Hopkins as the disturbed vent who couldn't get by without his wooden pal.

In modern times the

in love with window dresser Andrew McCarthy to the hit sounds of Jefferson Airplane. But it was all so predictable that you really did have to be a dummy to enjoy this one...

Equally bad was Joseph G. Prieto's (thankfully) little-seen *Miss Leslie's Dolls*, which was a poverty-row effort from 1973 about a disfigured lunatic who kept his mother's body in a shed and had a collection of sexy female 'dolls' that looked suspiciously like normal girls trying unsuccessfully to hold still. The psychotic hero's aim was to take over the body of one of the girls (makes a change from wanting to be a lumberjack. I supposed!), but he finished up being ripped apart by his own creations in much the same way as critics savaged the movie!

As we're discussing living dolls, I suppose we also ought to mention some of the movies in which people have been shrunk down to miniature size, from the Lon Chaney silent *The Unearthly Three* to *Dr Cyclops*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man/Woman*, *The Attack Of The Puppet People* and of course the recent blockbuster, *Honey I Shrunk The Kids*. The most macabre of these was a strange, off beat 1936 effort called *Devil Doll*, which

came from that master of weird films, Tod Browning (who also gave the world *Freaks* and the original Bela Lugosi *Dracula*). The story told of an escapee from Devil's Island (John Barrymore), who accidentally came into possession of a secret formula that could reduce all living things to miniature size. First he tried it on dogs and horses, then he employed the potion to take revenge on those who framed him, shrinking two of the culprits to the size of dolls. This was one of Browning's most striking pictures, utilising splendidly detailed outsize sets and eerie camerawork. The same title was used again almost thirty years later by director Lindsay Shonteff for a sinister yarn about a ventriloquist's dummy that took on a sinister life of its own. In the 1963 *Devil Doll*, William Sylvester played an American reporter in London who attended a performance by ventriloquist and hypnotist Voralli (Bryant Halliday). During the act Halliday hypnotises Sylvester's girlfriend Yvonne Romain, and afterwards she is stricken with a strange malady. It turns out that Halliday has stolen the girl's soul and transferred it to Hugo, his dummy. But instead of following Halliday's orders, little Hugo gets ideas of his own and starts threatening people with

ever-improving quality of special effects has enabled moviemakers to convincingly depict a wide variety of weird and wonderful creatures on the screen, from *Gremlins* to *Ghoulies*, to those ever-popular *Muppets*. But these were basically all creatures of fun and it was left to *Child's Play* to show just how sinister a living doll can be. The film's director Tom Holland told us, 'I got lots of letters from people who said that after seeing the film they had gone home, looked into the kid's room and thought, "this is the scariest room in the house. All those eyes, all those chubby little hands"....'

Now *Child's Play 2* is just around the corner (look for a video releases in June), and audiences will be able to see Chucky getting back on his little plastic feet to seek out his old playmate Andy Barclay (Alex Vincent), the unfortunate child whose life he almost ruined in the first movie. Of course nobody believes Andy when he says he's in danger from a killer doll. Well, would you? What with this and talk of a *Puppet Master 3*, we have to conclude that devil dolls are here to stay. So here's final warning to sensitive lady readers in particular - unless your name happens to be Joan Collins - stay well away from toy boys....